DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 303 379 SO 019 400

AUTHOR Pierce, Robert M.; Bell, Thomas L.
TITLE American Television: How Mass a Medium?
PUB DATE Apr 88
NOTE 31p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers (Phoenix, AZ, April 6-10, 1988).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Geographic Regions; Human Geography; *Mass Media Effects; *Mass Media Use; Networks; *Popular Culture; Programing (Broadcast); *Television Viewing

ABSTRACT

Television is one of the most pervasive forms of communication and one of the most influential and visible forms of popular culture. Some researchers believe that the mass communication capability of television has increased cultural homogeneity in all but a very few places. This paper contends that the American, National, and Columbia Broadcasting networks (ABC, NBC, and CBS) present enough variation in programming to permit television to be a variable, not homogeneous, mass medium. Differences also occur in the number of television channel choices available in individual homes. None of these three networks provides complete national programming delivery, and some geographic areas receive programming from only one or two of the three networks. A difference exists in the broadcast range between Ultra High Frequency (UHF) and Very High Frequency (VHF) stations, and local stations may consciously delete selected programs. Program content analysis and audience surveys are needed to determine if variations in communication patterns produce a diversity in U.S. popular culture. Nine references, four tables, and three maps are included. (JHP)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED303379

AMERICAN TELEVISION--HOW MASS A MEDIUM?

by

Robert M. Pierce
Department of Geography
SUNY College at Cortland
Cortland, NY 13045

and

Thomas L. Bell
Department of Geography
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville
Knoxville, TN 37996

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
ROBERT M. PIERCE

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

A paper presented at the Annual Meeting of
The Association of American Geographers,
Phoenix, Arizona
April, 1988

30 019 1988

AMERICAN TELEVISION--HOW MASS A MEDIUM?

Between the development of the first regular broadcasts in Germany in 1935 and the current use of cable and satellite technology in the United States and throughout the world, television has become one of the most pervasive forms of communication created by man. It has also come to be recognized by social scientists, for better or worse, as one of the most influential and visible forms of popular culture.

It is curious, therefore, that geographers have almost ignored the medium in their research. Although geographers have expressed great interest in certain aspects of the media, especially their diffusion over time and space, the media which are normally examined are either the printed word or radio transmissions (See Brooker-Gross, 1983; Bell, 1965).

The recent volume edited by Burgess and Gold entitled Geography, Popular Culture and the Media contains just one article on television--that of Gould and Lyew-Ayee (Burgess and Gold, 1985). That article is essentially a content analysis of the programming available on Jamaican television. The emphasis of their research is technological and societal; specifically, they are concerned about the high percentage of shows produced in the U.S. and the U.K. and, conversely, the relative paucity of indigeneously produced program fare. In a recent book which explores the same topic, Gould and his associates use Aitken's Q-analysis to systematize the relationships among television transmissions, the content of the programs being transmitted and the impact of that content upon people's lives (Gould, et al., 1984).

Despite this bold foray into the world of qualitative mathematical structure, the content analysis of Gould et al. fails to fully elucidate

the reasons why television programming in many Third World nations appears to be so ideologically dominated by the developed nations. Katz and Szecsko suggest the reasons are driven by economics--it is much cheaper for Third World nations to import syndicated shows from the Western nations than to produce their own (Katz and Szecsko, 1981). Given scarce development resources, television's ideological potential to inculcate indigenous societal values is seldom realized.

It is interesting that the few geographers who have examined television, have jumped immediately to the fundamental issue that pervades the work of critical social and media theorists--the ideological power of television (Lodziak, 1986). In so doing, many of the interesting geographic questions have been left unexplored. Content analysis, even in a non-Western context, is inherently aspatial. It is our contention in this paper that it is necessary to address the more inherently spatial, albeit descriptive, questions such as place-to-place differences in viewing patterns before one can address the more complex question of the impact of those broadcasts upon people's lives.

A fundamental part of this felt need for basic geographic analysis is the sheer extensiveness of the medium; it reaches all corners of the Western World, both socially and geographically. Lanegran and Palm have noted that television and other forms of mass communication have enabled national cultural traits to be spread to the most isolated locations. As a consequence of this pervasiveness and increased speed of communication, television has increased cultural homogeneity in all places except those they define as "self-conscious hotbeds or hearths." Television, by its very nature, assert Lanegran and Palm, produces passive participants in the

communication process resulting in the homogenization of the country's popular culture.

> "Without the weight of the homogenizing mass communications system, telling us what to think, how to look, what to wear, how to smell, and how to talk, thousands of variations in life-styles might emerge." (Lanegran and Palm, 1978, p. 142).

Thus they end their treatise ruing this homogenization with a rhetorical question: "Will this process continue unabated?"

This paper attempts to provide a response to this provocative question by first addressing their underlying premise--that television is, indeed, uniformly pervasive in the United States. We will provide evidence that even among the three major television networks, (ABC, NBC, CBS) there is substantial variation in the mass communication surface of the United States. Television in this country is a surprisingly variable mass medium. Thus the response to Lanegran and Palm's query should be, "No, because television communication has never been that homogeneous in the first place."

Measuring the Supposed Homogeneity of American Television

To assess homogeneity of television in the United States, a measure of the size and character of the medium's audience is needed. Specifically, we need to know if the viewership patterns for three national television networks and their individual programs vary significantly across the country. One might suppose that the monolithic oligopoly represented by ABC, CBS, and NBC should demonstrate little place-to-place variation in the audiences for each of their programs. Thus, data measuring audiences for each network program should enable us to determine whether American television is as homogenizing a communication system as Lanegran and Palm

suggest it is.

The television industry has primarily relied upon the A.C. Nielsen Company to provide audience information. Nielsen calculates two measures which reflect the size of audience a program attracts around the country. The first measure is the rating, the percentage of all television households viewing a program. Nationally, a single rating point is equal to 886,000 households possessing a television set. It is important to recognize the rating as a behavioral measure, for it involves the viewer's decision to turn the set on and select a channel. As such, it is an active measure of television viewing, differing from the more passive measure known as share. This second indicator of audience size focuses only on those households in which the television is turned on. Thus, a share is the percentage of the current television audience reached by a particular program.

This contrast between the proportion of the viewing audience (the share) and the proportion of the total potential audience (the rating) is sometimes striking. Bend, Oregon, for example, receives its network programming from a single source, the combined CBS-NBC affiliate KTVZ. Cable brings Bend residents network programming from Portland and Eugene, but thirty-eight percent of its television households do not have the service, meaning KTVZ is the sole source of network television for a significant minority of households. These television households can receive only one network program in any given time period and none from ABC. This lack of viewer choice greatly affects both the rating and share a program earns in central Oregon. CBS' "Murder, She Wrote" is one of that network's most popular programs, earning an average rating of 25.2 during

the last three years. In November, 1985 thirty-three percent of Bend television households tuned in KTVZ to watch the program. "Murder, She Wrote" had a share of 46 meaning nearly one-half of all television sets turned on at 8:00 p.m. Sunday were tuned to the local network affiliate.

Los Angeles, California, for means of comparison with Bend, Oregon, is one of the country's largest television markets, with over 4.5 million television households. Los Angeles viewers have a substantially greater range of viewing choices than residents in Bend. Within the Los Angeles market are nineteen local stations plus several dozen cable channels. Because of the range of viewer choices in Los Angeles, "Murder, She Wrote" does not do nearly as well as in Bend. The Los Angeles rating is, in fact, very close to the national average. Further, only one-third of the activated television sets in Los Angeles are tuned to the program. Despite the lower rating and share in Los Angeles, "Murder, She Wrote" reaches a larger audience there than in Bend, Oregon because of the sheer number of television households in the market.

This comparison of the Nielsen rating and share measurements illustrates two interrelated points: 1) the share measure can produce highly distorted measures of program popularity, assuming that share is related to the viewer decision to turn on the set in the first place; and 2) the distortion of program "popularity" is particularly great in small television markets where viewer choice is limited. Viewers in Los Angeles and Bend must both make the decision to turn on their sets, but once activated, program shares in the Bend, Oregon market for either CBS or NBC programming will invariably be greater. For this reason, we suggest that any analysis of television programming across the United States should rely

on the Nielsen rating index; a more meaningful comparative measure of television viewing than that of share.

The contrast between ratings and shares in Bend and Los Angeles illustrates one way in which the American television system is not homogeneous: viewers do not have the same choices throughout the country. Is the range of programming in Bend unusual, or are there a significant number of television markets in the U.S. with limited viewer choices? If the answer to this latter question is 'yes,' how can it be said that Americans respond to their television in the same fashion when the communication system doesn't deliver the same programming in each location?

American Television: How Variable a Medium?

An examination of the three national television networks in the U.S. reveals that, in fact, none is truly national in its delivery; i.e., neither ABC, CBS nor NBC deliver programming to every television market in the country. These "holes" in television communication are, surprisingly, quite areally extensive. Of the 209 Designated Market Areas (DMAs) recognized by A.C. Nielsen in the 1986 television season, fifty-three did not have full-time affiliates of all three networks. Of that number, twenty-eight were missing full-time ABC programming, thirty-five CBS and twenty-seven did not have a full time NBC affiliate. This represents twenty-five percent of the television markets in the country. By virtue of reaching more markets, NBC has a built-in advantage in its race with the other networks to establish the largest audience and, therefore, generate the greatest advertising revenue.

These figures establish that there are large gaps in the network

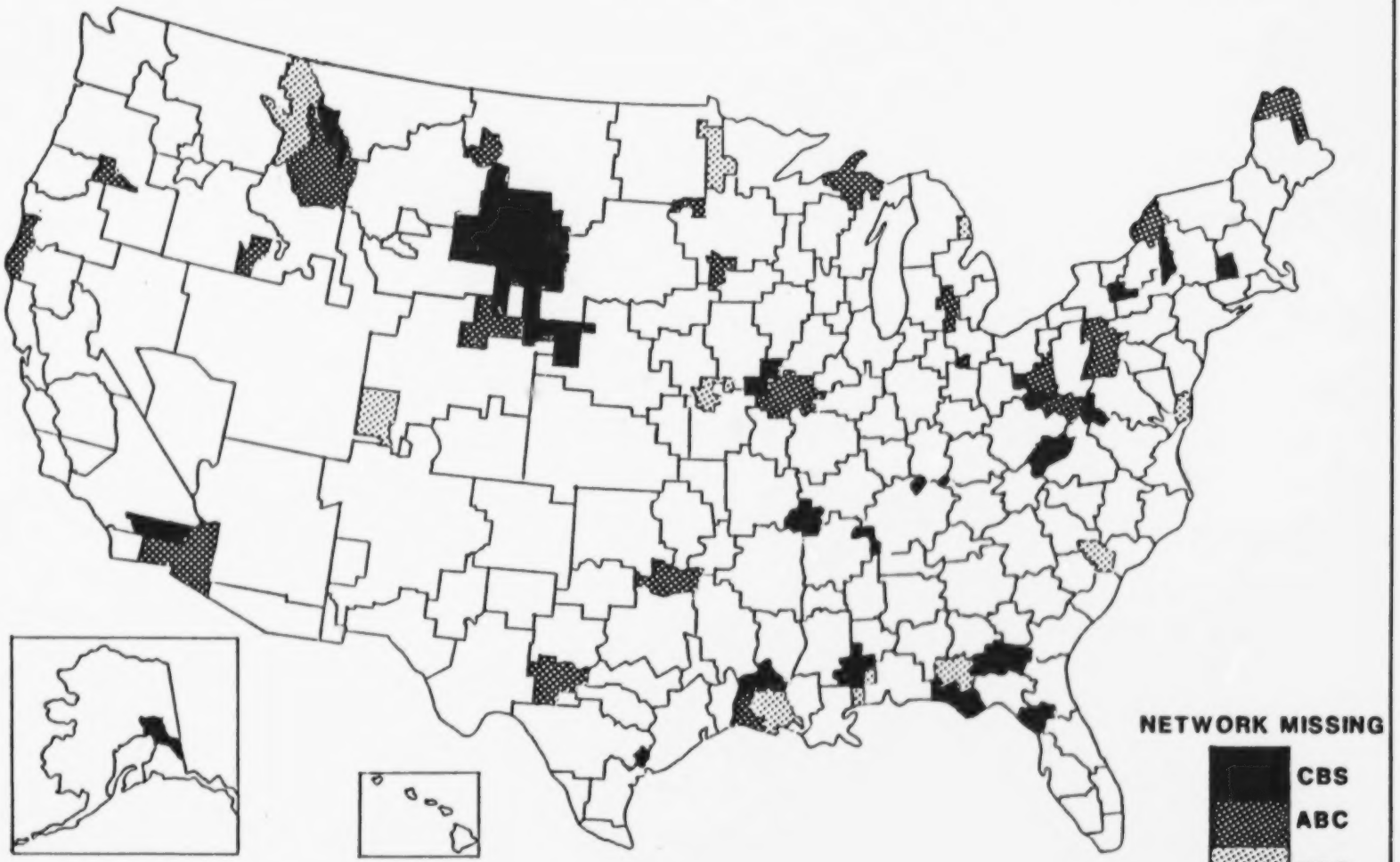
affiliate communication system of the United States. Just how small and remote are these market areas which are missing network programming? Figure 1 displays the current Nielsen Station Index Designated Market Areas. Those without all three networks present are highlighted.

[FIGURE ONE GOES HERE]

The political nature of DMA boundaries delimitation and the clustering of complementary network-missing markets, suggest that households in these lcoations are not entirely missing the programming received by the rest of the country. DMAs are discrete units in what is, theoretically, a continuous communications surface. Boundaries of DMAs are based upon county boundaries and the station(s) broadcast radius. An underlying assumption in the configuration of DMAs is that the signals of stations originating in the market reach all parts of the counties contained therein. Clearly, transmission signal strength pays no heed to county boundaries. Few, if any, households in northern portions of huge Inyo County, California,can, for example, receive programming from Los Angeles without cable. But, because Los Angeles stations reach the southern fringes of Inyo County, the entire county is included in the Los Angeles DMA. Nielsen includes, however, just two Inyo County households in its Los Angeles sample of 3,277 when calculating program ratings for this market area.

Just as there are areas of overbounding in the Nielsen demarcation of television market areas, there are also locations receiving programming from adjacent DMAs which are not recognized by this discrete market delimitation. Los Angeles television signals penetrate the Palm Springs, California and San Diego, Calfornia Designated Market Areas without the benefit of cable, but because local stations achieve a larger share of

TELEVISION MARKETS WITHOUT THREE NETWORKS



these audiences, the Los Angeles communication influence is simply ignored when market boundaries are drawn and ratings are measured.

This underbounding or spill-over influence is most important in the clustering of DMAs which do not possess affiliates from all three networks. These locations are among the least populated television markets in the country, and are unable to meet threshold requirements needed to support three affiliates. This problem has frequently been addressed by a rational form of spatial complementarity in which each DMA supports a single station from a different network. The clustering of these television markets thus makes it possible for many of the households in any particular DMA to receive broadcasts from all three networks. Markets in Butte, Helena and Missoula, Montana; Dothan, Alabama, Albany, Georgia and Panama City, Florida; and Alexandria, Lake Charles and Lafayette, Louisiana are among the numerous complementary clusters employing this national market response to threshold requirements.

Thus, Figure 1 by no means represents a definitive map of television isolation. It does, however, express a degree of limitation in the communications surface. Ratings data demonstrate a sharp dropoff in audiences for network programs emanating outside a designated television market (Table 1).

[TABLE ONE GOES HERE]

All three networks suffer statistically significant dropoffs in their overall ratings in DMAs which receive programming from affiliates located beyond their market. ABC's ratings are particularly sensitive to station location. Virtually all individual programs demonstrate this same dropoff in audience size, including the most popular programs examined during the

TABLE ONE
Influence of Station Location
on Program Ratings
November 1985

Network/Program	Program Ratings: Stations Within DMA	Stations Beyond DMA	Student's T	Probability
NBC	18.9	14.6	5.99	.001
Cosby Show	37.7	33.8	2.54	.005
Hill Street Blues	15.9	13.0	3.05	.002
Night Court	21.6	13.4	7.25	.001
CBS	18.4	16.3	3.20	.001
Dallas	29.9	26.8	2.58	.005
Magnum, P.I.	17.9	16.5	1.44*	.075
Twilight Zone	15.0	12.7	3.16	.001
ABC	13.2	8.9	6.72	.001
Moonlighting	17.7	12.1	6.10	.001
Spenser for Hire	11.1	6.9	5.82	.001
Who's The Boss?	21.7	14.1	7.16	.001

*Not statistically significant

"sweeps" month of November 1987. Advertisers paying one of the highest premiums in television for air time on "The Cosby Show" may reach 3.38 million fewer households as a consequence of NBC not being present in twenty-seven markets around the country. Nationally, "Who's The Boss?" is among the most successful of ABC's programs, but this situation comedy may suffer the loss of up to 6.58 million television households in markets where there is no ABC affiliate. Advertisers buy network time based upon a program's total national audience, reflected by its ratings. While "The Cosby Show" may bring a product to more households than any other, there are also millions of Americans who will never see the program's commercials. The buying behavior of most television viewers may be influenced by a program's commercials, as Lanegran and Palm suggest, but only if they can actually view the advertisements, and there are economic and technological barriers which prevent this from happening.

The dropoff in network ratings can, in part, be explained by viewer loyalty to, and familiarity with, their local DMA station, regardless of its network affiliation. Even with the increase in available stations as a result of cable television, viewers consistently demonstrate a preference for their local affiliate, particularly when it comes to news programming. This identity carries over to other program selections, reflected by the often precipitous decline of ratings for network entertainment broadcast by more distant, less familiar television stations.

The relative location of television stations may also produce lower ratings for a second reason: the distance-decay of broadcast signals. Television signals are dispersed over two broadcast bands--Very High Frequency (VHF) and Ultra High Frequency (UHF). UHF signals lack both the

range and signal quality of those broadcast by VHF stations (Channels two through thirteen). Conscious of the contrast in broadcast range between UHF and VHF stations, the networks have always sought affiliation, whenever possible, with a VHF station. Network affiliates even prefer stations with a lower channel number to make it easier for the viewer to recall the network's position on the dial. In the larger television markets, UHF stations are invariably non-affiliated (i.e. independents). They are typically newer stations than their VHF counterparts. As late arrivals in the market, these stations found little or no room on the lower broadcast band, forcing them into UHF broadcasting and, invariably, suffering lower ratings because their signals are harder to receive.

Designated Market Areas with smaller populations more often have network affiliates on UHF stations. Albany, Georgia, Champaign, Illinois and Alexandria, Louisiana are typical of these DMAs, with one VHF network station and others broadcasting on the UHF band. As their populations have grown, they have been able to support additional stations and network affiliates. However, FCC regulations limit access to the VHF band, resulting in new network affiliates frequently being forced to appear on UHF channels fourteen through eighty-three.

With a greater proportion of their network affiliates broadcasting on Ultra High Frequency, the disparity in program ratings between UHF and VHF outlets is particularly acute among the DMAs highlighted in Figure One. Despite the advent of cable technology, which has resulted in an increase in the broadcast range of many UHF stations, this disparity remains. Table 2 clearly demonstrates that all three networks reach significantly larger audiences with their VHF affiliates than their UHF counterparts.

[TABLE TWO GOES HERE]

TABLE TWO
Influence of Broadcasting Frequency
on Program Ratings
November 1985

Network/Program	Program Ratings VHF	UHF	Student's T	Probability
NBC	19.2	17.9	2.05	.02
Cosby Show	37.9	37.0	0.75*	.22
Hill Street Blues	16.5	14.2	3.17	.001
Night Court	22.0	20.2	1.86	.03
CBS	18.7	16.9	2.73	.003
Dallas	30.2	28.5	1.23*	.11
Magnum, P.I.	19.1	16.6	1.59	.05
Twilight Zone	15.3	13.0	3.13	.001
ABC	13.8	11.5	4.57	.001
Moonlighting	18.5	15.6	3.96	.001
Spenser For Hire	11.8	9.3	4.35	.001
Who's The Boss?	22.7	19.1	4.37	.001

*Not statistically significant

Only the highest rated programs demonstrate no statistically significant difference in audience size depending on the broadcast frequency of their outlets. Among the networks, ABC suffers the sharpest decline in its audience size, losing over two million households when broadcasting on UHF affiliates.

Given these results, it is little wonder that each network vigorously seeks affiliation with VHF stations whenever possible. Network ratings grow significantly as a result of the range and quality of broadcast signals, particularly in DMAs where there is only one VHF station. Regardless of the quality and popularity of its programming, a network will automatically see its ratings rise in these markets when it can capture the VHF affiliation. Historically, CBS was the first of the networks to invest heavily in small town America. As a result, eighty-four percent of its affiliates today are VHF outlets. ABC, as the youngest of the three networks, has only sixty-nine percent VHF affiliation. This contrast in broadcast technology is one significant reason why throughout much of their histories, CBS has been this country's highest rated network and ABC the lowest.

The Ratings: Measures of Program Popularity?

The variability in television audience which can be attributed to place-to-place differences in the medium's technology is reflected by the considerable range of national ratings among even the most popular programs (Table 3). This variation in ratings suggests that measures purporting to assess the popularity of programs may in fact be partially a reflection of imperfections in the communications grid rather than a

definitive indicator of viewer preferences or measure of perceived program quality and popularity.

[TABLE THREE GOES HERE]

Over thirty-seven percent of all television households watch "The Bill Cosby Show," but that audience varies from fourteen percent in Bowling Green, Kentucky where there is no NBC affiliate, to fifty-four percent in Glendive, Montana where there is only one station. Once again, the lack of viewer choice appears to greatly distort the supposed popularity ratings of a program. All of the top ten rated programs have similar disparate ranges in their audiences. When presented with only one program, television viewers will apparently watch whatever their sets can receive.

This impression is confirmed by an examination of programs with the lowest national audience ratings (Table 4).

[TABLE FOUR GOES HERE]

The low ratings of this ABC-dominated list indicate that far fewer Americans are willing to turn on their sets to watch these programs. But, it also demonstrates that if these are the only programs available in a market, viewers will still watch them in far greater numbers than the national average. Three times the average number of households viewed ABC's "Our Family Honor" in Ottumwa, Iowa, where KTVO is the only VHF station in the market. "The George Burns Comedy Hour" was a short-lived flop on CBS, but it earned a 30.0 rating in Twin Falls, Idaho on channel eleven's KMVT. The variety show soundly defeated its NBC competition appearing on UHF channel thirty-eight.

These low-rated programs have far more variability in their audiences, primarily because they are only able to do well in markets where there is

TABLE THREE
Highest Rated Programs
November 1985

	Network	Average Rating	Minimum Rating	Maximum Rating	Coeff. of Var.
Cosby Show	NBC	37.2	14.0	54.0	.201
Family Ties	NBC	31.6	9.0	50.0	.210
Dallas	CBS	29.4	13.0	50.0	.227
60 Minutes	CBS	26.2	8.0	42.0	.213
Murder She Wrote	CBS	24.6	10.0	49.0	.218
Miami Vice	NBC	23.1	7.0	38.0	.231
Highway to Heaven	NBC	22.9	8.0	48.0	.283
Dynasty	ABC	22.8	5.0	44.0	.309
Golden Girls	NBC	22.4	8.0	43.0	.242
Falcon Crest	CBS	21.0	6.0	38.0	.268
Kate & Allie	NBC	21.0	10.0	42.0	.255

TABLE FOUR
Lowest Rated Programs
November 1985

	Network	Average Rating	Minimum Rating	Maximum Rating	Coeff. of Var.
Our Family Honor	ABC	4.0	0.3	12.0	.524
Shadow Chasers	ABC	6.4	1.0	22.0	.499
Hollywood Beat	ABC	6.4	0.4	18.0	.413
George Burns	CBS	9.1	0.2	30.0	.413
Lady Blue	ABC	9.5	0.1	24.0	.374
Punky Brewster	NBC	9.7	0.2	25.0	.507
Benson	ABC	9.9	2.0	24.0	.367
Charlie & Co.		10.1	1.0	29.0	.384
Silver Spoons		10.4	0.2	27.0	.449
Different Strokes		10.4	0.1	25.0	.371

relatively little competition. The coefficient of variation, a measure of statistical variability based upon the mean and standard deviation of a variable, is applied to the ratings of television shows by DMA (Tables 3 and 4). Clearly, audience variability is related to the national popularity of a program. Perhaps a better measure of a program's popularity is the relative consistency (i.e. low variability) in the size of its audiences in each market, particularly in those DMAs where all three networks are present on VHF stations.

The Case of the Missing Television Program

In our discussion of network competition in DMAs it has been assumed that if any affiliate is present in the market, viewers will receive that network's programs. Such is not always the case. Thus, a final factor producing variability in the American television system is the decision of local affiliates to choose whether or not they wish to pick up their network feeds. In some cases, affiliates can generate more revenue by carrying a syndicated program in lieu of network programming during a prime-time slot. Often the station will then broadcast the preempted network program at 11:30 P.M. or a similar non-prime time period, producing low ratings for the network. ABC has, for example, recently been the victim of the decision of many local affiliates to carry the new syndicated version of "Star Trek: The Next Generation" rather than some of the network's Saturday programs.

An affiliate's decision to time-shift or not carry a program creates a missing link in a television network. In most cases this decision is made for financial reasons, but not always. Throughout the history of television in the United States, there have been instances when affiliates

have made the decision not to carry a network feed because they objected to the social or political content of the program. In effect, these affiliates were engaging in local censorship. Programs whose content has a sexual character, is politically controversial or runs counter to local religious mores are most frequently the victim of this local censorship.

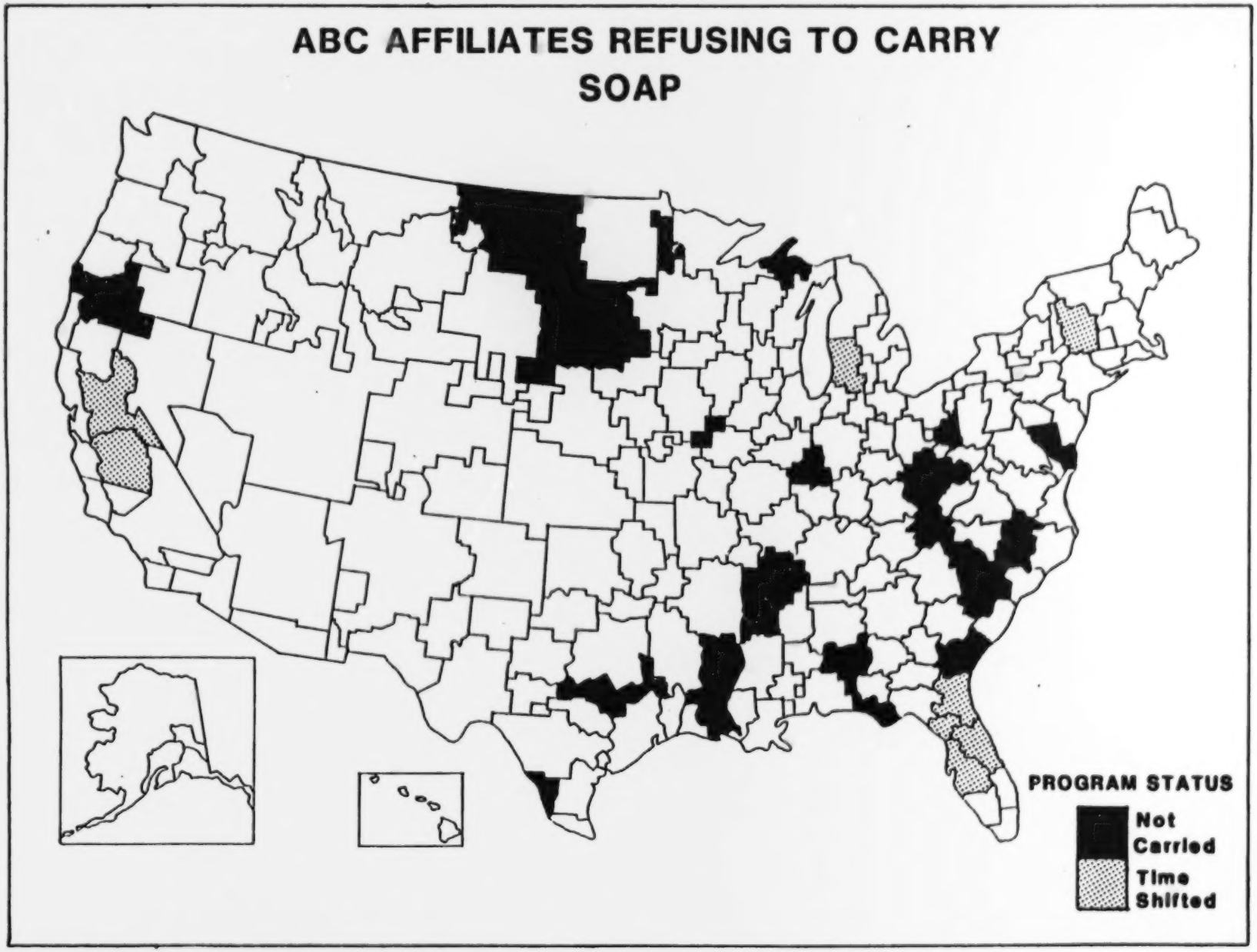
One of the most extensive cases of affiliate censorship took place among NBC stations in 1976. "Judge Horton and the Scottsboro Boys," the story of the controversial trial of several black youths wrongly accused of raping a white woman, could not be seen by most Southern viewers even if they had wished to because of the refusal of numerous NBC affiliates in the region to carry the program.

Later in the decade, the experiences of the situation comedy "Soap!" typified the censorship of network programs that might have offended local sensibilities. The humor of the show was dominated by a strong sexual content, and the writers of "Soap!" frequently poked fun at some of the country's major social and religious institutions, much to the discomfort of many in the television industry.

"Soap!" producer/writer Susan Harris also wrote the abortion episodes of the CBS program "Maude," which many affiliates of that network refused to carry. She encountered even more controversy and censorship when her new program "Soap!" made its debut in the fall of 1977. Based solely on the pre-broadcast publicity and notoriety surrounding "Soap!", ABC's Baltimore affiliate WJZ became the first station to refuse to carry "Soap!" deciding for its viewers that they would be offended by the program. WJZ's refusal decision was quickly followed by twenty-eight other affiliates. Eight additional stations would only carry "Soap!" late at night. The pattern of this local censorship is depicted in Figure 2.

[FIGURE TWO GOES HERE]

ABC AFFILIATES REFUSING TO CARRY SOAP



To a great extent, "Soap!" experienced a pattern of mostly Southern opposition. One can speculate as to why numerous affiliates in the region refused to carry the program. Perhaps the religious fundamentalism and the social and political traditionalism of the region were reasons why many Southern stations refused to carry a program which specialized in the bashing of traditional institutions.

Among current programs, NBC's "Night Court" has enjoyed almost as much notoriety as "Soap!". Similar to "Soap!" in its choice of sexual humor and also prone to generating laughs at the expense of traditional institutions, "Night Court" has also experienced "Soap!"'s censorship. In November, 1985, it was not possible, for example, to see "Night Court" on any NBC affiliate in Oklahoma. Tyler and San Angelo, Texas viewers were also denied the opportunity to pass judgment on "Night Court."

Conclusions and Implications

This paper has addressed a long-standing supposition about television--that it is a monolithic communications system uniformly influencing Americans throughout the country. We have questioned that assumption by presenting three major factors which have created a highly variable television communication surface in the United States: 1) the lack of truly national networks; 2) the difference in broadcast range between UHF and VHF stations; and 3) the conscious deletion of programs by local affiliates. Until networks are more fully elaborated, cable doubles its penetration into television households, and local affiliates deliver all their network programming, the industry will fall far short of the pervasive, monolithic communication system it is popularly held to be.

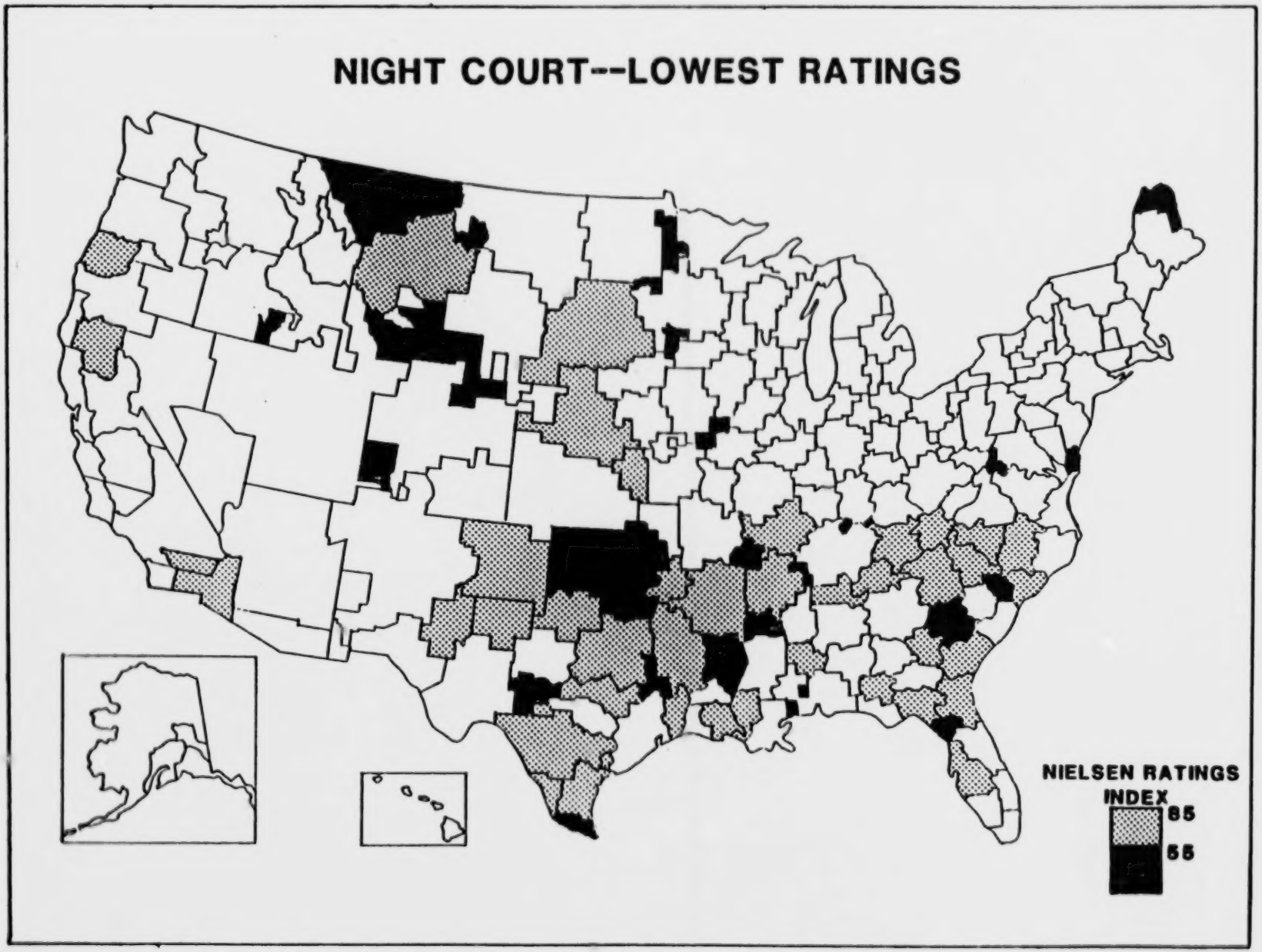
While there is considerable diversity in American television, one must also ask if there is any fundamental difference in the programs of one

network versus those of another. Will, for example, the viewers who only receive CBS have a markedly different cultural outlook than those who are influenced by programs and advertisements from all three networks? Whether variations in the communications surface also produce a diversity in American popular culture is a question requiring both detailed program content analysis and in-depth audience surveys. Survey results indicate that Americans have never watched more television that they currently do (over 7 hours per day on average) nor have they even been more disenchanted with programming content (Bower, 1985). Does television programming have to be more of the same or can technological growth in the medium foster cultural growth and awareness as well? We recognize that there are variations in viewing behavior among Americans which cannot be explained by the three factors cited in this paper. Figures 3 and 4 display patterns which certainly merit further study and explanation.

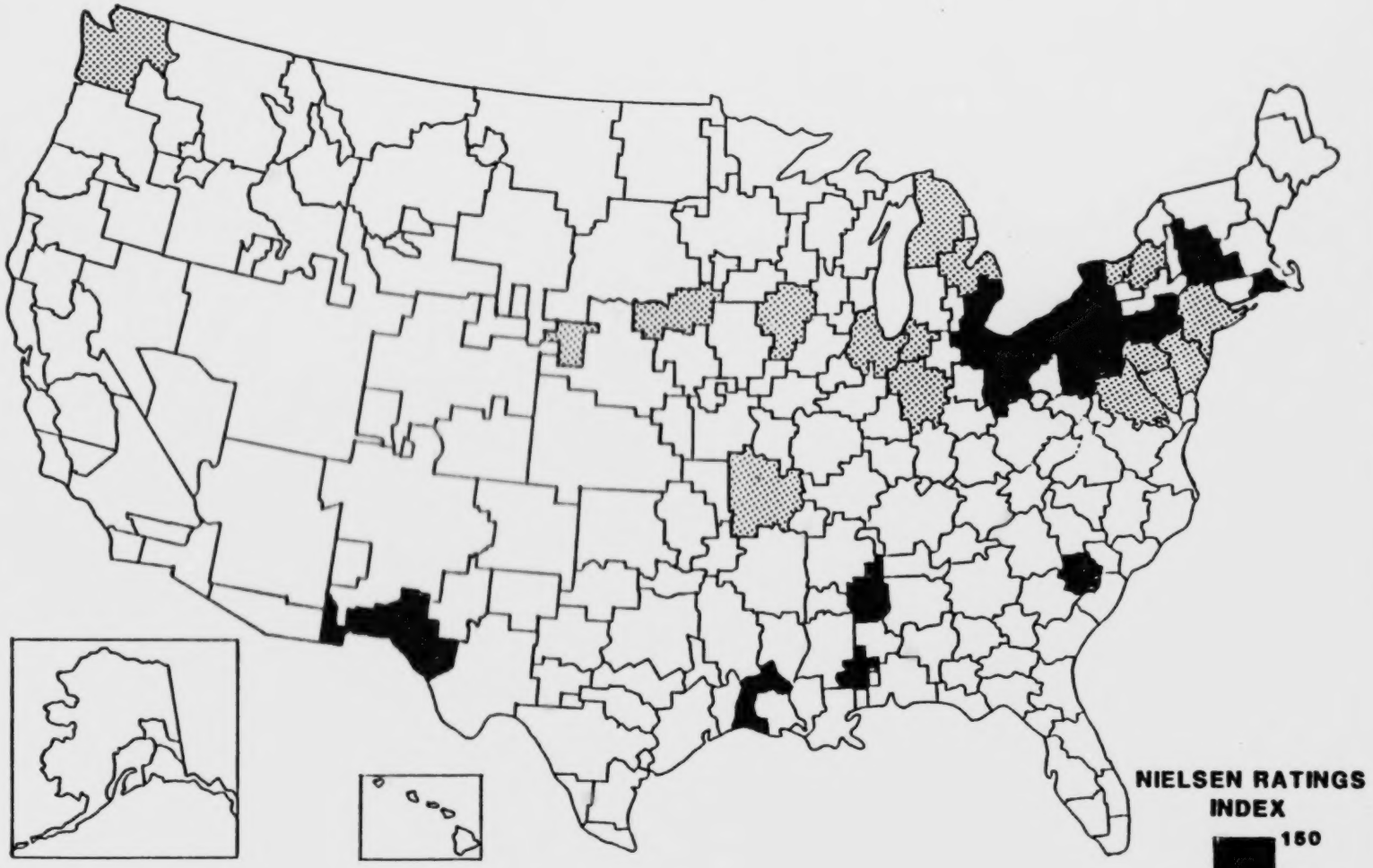
[FIGURES THREE AND FOUR GO HERE]

While all NBC affiliates in the Deep South carry "Night Court", the program's ratings in that region are the lowest in the country, a pattern reminiscent of the opposition to "Soap!" eight years earlier. In contrast, the cultural hearth of "Night Court"'s brand of humor is focused on the urban corridor connecting Chicago and Boston. "Soap!"'s highest ratings were consistently earned in the same markets.

What does this regional contrast in television appreciation reveal about us culturally and socially? A spatial analysis of television ratings which controls for effects of the technological communications issues raised in this paper, presents the geographer with a rich opportunity to tease out cultural tastes and preferences within the surprisingly diverse television industry.


NIGHT COURT--LOWEST RATINGS
NIELSEN RATINGS INDEX
85
55

NIGHT COURT--HIGHEST RATINGS



References Cited

Bell, W., The Diffusion of Radio and Television Broadcasting Stations in the United States, unpublished Master's thesis, Department of Geography, The Pennsylvania State University, 1965.

Bower, Robert T., The Changing Television Audience in America, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

Brooker-Gross, Susan, "Spatial Aspects of Newsworthiness," Geografiska Annaler, Vol. 65B (1983), pp. 1-9.

Burgess, Jacquelin and John R. Gold, Geography, The Media and Popular Culture, (London: Croom Helm, 1985).

Gould, Peter and Anne Lyew-Ayee, "Television in the Third World: A High Wind on Jamaica," in J. Burgess and J.R. Gold, eds., Geography, The Media and Popular Culture (London: Croom Helm, 1985), pp. 33-62.

Gould, Peter, et al., The Structure of Television--Structure: The World of Television (London: Pion Ltd., 1984).

Katz, Elihu and T. Szecsko, eds., Mass Media and Social Change, (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Press, 1981).

Lanegran, David and Risa Palm, An Invitation to Geography, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978).

Lodziak, Conrad, The Power of Television: A Critical Appraisal, (London: Frances Pinter, 1986).